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The Ethics of Social Journalism

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"Social media" is one of the biggest buzzwords in journalism practice and journalism studies. This essay focuses on one aspect of social media – "social journalism" – that involves work done by journalists within the social network that constitutes the contemporary media universe. Social journalism is a form of the craft that is more self-consciously open and participatory than the sort we were practicing, teaching, or studying just a few years ago. In particular, I want to explore the ethical issues confronting journalists in the networked media environment.

A caveat: Many of the comments here from journalists are negative, dominated by concerns that add up to a relatively one-sided view, probably unfairly so. Journalists are too often portrayed, not least by researchers like us, as change-resistant, fearful, defensive, and just generally dinosaurs-who-do-not-get-it, whatever the "it" of the moment happens to be. In reality, of course, journalists exhibit a wide range of attitudes, opinions, and actions.

Considerable innovation is emanating from contemporary newsrooms, as well as considerable appropriation of other people's innovative ideas. Many journalists are using Twitter, for instance, simply as a promotional tool (Holcomb, Gross, & Mitchell, 2011). But plenty of others are using it as an aggregation platform, and even more have realized it is a fantastic reporting resource. Similarly, despite myriad misgivings about user comments and

other “user-generated content,” newsroom denizens are finding ways to address the problems, both through technology and, more significantly, through modification of long-standing cultural perspectives that are increasingly open to a loosening of control over civic discourse.

So while this essay highlights real ethical concerns, those concerns do not make up the sum total of journalistic reaction to change.

That said, however, most of the concerns that do exist are rooted in ethical issues. As journalists squarely confront existential questions about who they are and what they do, they tend to fall back on practitioner ethics – guiding principles, norms, cultural standards, and practices -- as differentiating them from those outside the newsroom who otherwise are doing journalistic tasks and filling a journalistic social role. People from all walks of life are gathering information, turning it into a viable narrative, and disseminating it not only to an audience of personal acquaintances but also, through a large and growing variety of social media tools, to what is undeniably an undifferentiated, unknown mass audience.

So everyone can be a publisher. What, then, differentiates the journalist – if anything?

Few journalists are willing to say the answer is “nothing.” Instead, what they tend to say is that the answer is “ethics.” They may not use that term. They are more likely to talk about accuracy or verification or credibility or fairness. But whatever the terminology, ethical principles are what they are talking about when they try to articulate what sets them apart from the unwashed masses. Ironic, perhaps, as a key criticism of journalists is that too often, they are not acting ethically at all. But there you have it.

The ethical issues that journalists tend to talk about in relation to digital media can be placed in three broad categories. Many of the issues also have clear legal implications, some of which may be different in an Australian context than an American one. Of particular note are libel and liability issues related to user contributions, where laws vary considerably from

country to country. Users do violate those laws, not infrequently, out of either ignorance or malice. But again, my take here is an ethical one.

The first category covers a range of issues related to the fundamental and nearly universal journalistic norm of truth-telling. Journalists have many concerns about the ability to maintain standards of accuracy online. There are concerns about being able to verify information, to do the fact-checking that journalists believe is essential. At a broader level, there are concerns about the effects of potentially inaccurate and unverified information on the credibility of journalists as individuals and their organizations as social institutions ostensibly committed to public service in their local, regional, or national communities.

A second cluster of ethical issues about which journalists express concern relates to opening up to users a media spaces those journalists used to control. Many if not most journalists seem to feel a need to also control what users contribute. But the resources available to do that are, by and large, not located within the newsroom. On the contrary, most of the control over how the online news discourse is being shaped, for instance through community management tools, involves the community managing itself rather than any central authority – the newsroom, say – doing the managing.

In other words, control is distributed or shared amongst users themselves, creating concerns when user norms are looser, as they typically are, than traditional journalistic norms in related areas. Issues include the effects of user anonymity and the disconnect between their offline and online identities; the potential for bias in user-generated content; and, a big concern, the general tone of much of the discourse, which is frequently less than polite.

The third grouping might be termed practitioner issues, again encompassing various topics, of which two seem particularly important. The first is transparency, arguably the underlying ethical framework of the Internet (Karlsson, 2010): How much and what kinds of information to disclose about who you are, what you do, and why you do it. The second

involves journalistic independence or autonomy, particularly in deciding what's news. Now that journalists can – and do – see on a continual basis what users want, how big an influence should that information have? Now that users can – and do – tell journalists what they want, how much should practitioners listen and what should they do with what they hear?

Truth-telling

Truth-telling is a paramount ethical norm for journalists and a paramount ethical concern online. Concerns about accuracy, verifiability and credibility are closely intertwined for online journalists.

Accuracy

The concern that getting it fast will take precedence over getting it right is something I've been hearing since I talked with journalists for my doctoral thesis in the mid-1990s – before many had even seen the Internet. "In print, we've always had the luxury of, well, let's see if what we have immediately is actually true and the whole story and can be verified," an editor at a metro daily newspaper told me back in 1995 (Singer, 1997: 82). "The old adage was 'get it first, but first, get it right.' Now, it's just 'get it first.'" At that point, he had had little exposure to the Internet and virtually no personal experience either using it or contributing content to it. But he could see the potential problems with a medium that seemed to foreground speed over accuracy.

In the intervening years, the concern has only been exacerbated as each new technological wave has facilitated faster dissemination of information. The ability to see what everyone else is reporting also adds competitive pressures and a cultural dimension to the need for speed (Boczkowski, 2010). Indeed, as media outlets have migrated to a digital-first publishing strategy, the pressure to publish immediately has become steadily greater.

Of course, journalists want to be first and be right. But the reality is that as the expectation grows that multiple and rapid updates will be available online, some of those updates are bound to contain mistakes. It's certainly true that slow journalism also contains errors. As a chief copy editor from The New York Times put it: "Bad calls happen in all kinds of time pressures. God knows, we've made notorious mistakes very slowly" (Richard, 2009). But it's hard to argue with the perception that mistakes are much more likely online. In

addition to the pressure for speedy updates, decreased staffing levels mean fewer people are doing not only more things but also more kinds of things: online, print, multimedia, blogs, social networking. And newsrooms today contain more generalists than specialists, particularly among editors, to do them. The result is fewer people editing copy and less expertise amongst those who are.

In fact, much online copy today is published without being seen by an editor at all. The editor who scrutinized a story before publication has largely been replaced by website users who, in the words of a journalist at Britain's Guardian newspaper, "can act as whistle blowers if there's dodgy content" (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 15). That was true before the rise of Twitter and other live blogging tools. It's even more pervasive now. Combined with more content in more formats, many of them still unfamiliar, mistakes are bound to be published first and, maybe, corrected second rather than the other way around.

Ethical decisions involve making choices and finding the right balance amongst alternatives. When journalists have to choose between ensuring they're fast and ensuring they're right, how should they make those judgements? What factors should they weigh? Which ones take precedence in which situations, and why? The choice is not necessarily between right and wrong. It's between OK and more OK – or less OK. There is a value to getting information out quickly, particularly certain kinds of information. In a major natural disaster or other breaking news story, the number of victims inevitably will change, damage estimates will change, the political situation on the ground will change. In the meantime, we want to know what's happening right now, and so we tolerate the mutability of the information as part of the story itself. We understand that fresh information emerges over time, and that what seems to be true now may not hold up.

Indeed, for such fast-moving stories, audiences seem quite tolerant of the fact that initial information may prove inaccurate as details become known. They may even welcome

that dynamism as a more engaging and exciting narrative form. But they are far less tolerant about things they think journalist should have gotten right but didn't, particularly stories that purport to explain how or why something happened. That's the kind of detail where the emphasis is, and properly should be, on getting it right the first time.

Moreover, of course, journalists can be sure that someone out there just can't wait to a) let them know they screwed up and b) tell everyone else they screwed up. Some journalists say this online environment actually makes them more cautious about publishing precisely because of this public embarrassment potential (Singer & Ashman, 2009). I'm not wholly convinced that's true for most practitioners most of the time, but it is true that they think about it. When every word is open to public scrutiny, the ability to humiliate the writer is a lot greater than when the best recourse was a letter to editor, which might or might not get published, or even an angry phone call to the newsroom, which might or might not get past the receptionist who answer the phone.

One increasingly popular strategy to help defuse the situation is a public mea culpa – and public thanks to users who pointed out an error. "By saying, 'Actually, I didn't have the piece of information I needed that would have told me I was wrong about that, so-and-so supplied it, thanks very much, now I know where I stand,' that actually leaves you looking better than if you just pretend that you didn't make a mistake," said an online community manager at Britain's Telegraph (Singer et al., 2011: 126), a newspaper that along with the Guardian has been in the UK vanguard of encouraging user input.

In other words, the broadly social, interactive nature of the medium serves as a corrective measure for potential inaccuracy. Yes, we're going to get information up as soon as we can, some journalists are saying, and yes, it's true that makes it harder to catch errors in-house before we do. But we now have many additional people looking over our shoulders, which brings two potential benefits. One, as the Guardian journalist points out, accuracy is

enhanced because that dodgy content will be flagged and brought to our attention – probably in no uncertain terms! And two, as the Telegraph journalist suggests, the process of engaging with users en route to enhancing accuracy can build trust and foster opportunities for more open, collaborative news construction. Both approaches, perhaps paradoxically, enable journalists to use their own mistakes to actually strengthen relationships with a generally distrustful if not outright critical public.

Before leaving the topic of accuracy, a quick mention of corrections policies is in order. These policies still vary considerably online. Questions arise about how and when to signal to your audience first, that you got something wrong and second, that you have fixed it. For instance, publications typically do not signal the correction of what they consider minor errors such as typos or misspellings. Instead, they just change them and update the item, a process called "scrubbing." For more significant mistakes, media organizations employ a range of procedures. A few use strikethroughs in the text. For major corrections, most update the story and append a notice about what was done. Of course, there is no guarantee that the update will be seen by the person who read it the first time – likely not, in fact, because why would I click on a story that I think I already read? In the meantime, the speed with which the first story may have been spread around the world is, as with everything published online, quite breathtaking.

Verifiability

The ethical issue of verifiability is closely related to accuracy. With so much pressure on reporters to update information quickly, it obviously becomes harder to verify information before it is published. And again, the decreasing likelihood that an online editor will scrutinize the information a reporter gathers also removes that level of fact-checking. The result, not surprisingly, is a decline in the pre-publication verification process.

Some organizations have sought to buck this trend. Der Spiegel, in Germany, has employed dozens of people as full-time fact checkers, apparently with good results. But in many other countries – including Australia, Britain, and the United States – the trend has been in the opposite direction, with deep cuts in sub-editor ranks. Indeed, subs typically were among the hardest-hit groups in U.S. newsrooms in the repeated rounds of layoffs in the late 2000s and into the current decade (Pew Research, 2008). It may well be true that the post-publication verification process is strengthened online – that every user becomes, in a way, a sub-editor checking for errors large and small – but whether the results are as good is highly debatable. In any case, it certainly is not the traditional way that journalists have thought about verification: that it properly comes before publication, not after.

A related problem involves determining the veracity of other online sources. Yes, journalists have developed an eye for hoaxes, as well as savviness about how to assess digital credibility. "We received a fascinating picture of a cargo ship bridge in the North Sea, really very impressive," said an editor at Der Spiegel. "Then we realized that the picture must have been about eight years old and was taken from some website" (Singer et al., 2011: 128-129). But especially because of the desire to get in fresh voices and diverse perspectives, it can be harder to tell what's credible and what's not than it is if you're just going to rely on a gov.au source or the public pronouncements of a major business through its website. The growth of mobile social media such as Twitter only adds to the difficulties for journalists.

An emerging standard for dealing with such verification challenges is to use the information but to caution users that it has not been independently substantiated. This approach was evident in the Arab Spring reports in early 2011, when many of the rapidly evolving details originated with social media users on the ground and were then passed on by Western media outlets. We've seen it in less momentous stories, too, particularly from

corners of the world where those Western outlets no longer have foreign bureaus or local correspondents, and so must rely on these less authoritative voices, for better or worse.

Authentic accounts from the scene are great, but they also can be authentically wrong. – sometimes deliberately, with an intent to mislead or deceive, but more often because of subtler issues. Perhaps the online sources are perfectly legitimate, in the sense that they are who they claim to be. But they also may have a strong bias in relation to the topic they're writing about, a bias the journalist republishing that account may not recognize. Twitter feeds are an obvious example, but there are others. If, for instance, the journalist finds an unfamiliar source through a Google search, it's easy to be misled – and, in turn, to mislead the audience. Plenty of techniques can help journalists assess credibility, but even so, bad things can happen, particularly under pressure to get information out in a hurry.

Another ethical issue is that while there may be nothing wrong with the online source as a source, they may not have seen what they think they saw – and they may not know or understand much about it, either, creating obvious problems for any journalist relying on that second-hand account. (As an aside, this lack of observational reliability is one reason user photos are relatively popular among journalists, while text is seen as more problematic. The camera does sometimes lie, but less often than the pen – or the keypad.)

Needless to say, these issues all exist outside the network. Every concern in this essay has been around for a very long time; in my view, the ethical issues themselves do not change much. But the medium and its effects on the craft of journalism create new and in many cases more intense worries.

More broadly, questions recur with startling frequency about just what the journalist's role is online. Despite the pressures, "fact checker" remains one common answer: Regardless of where the information originates, the journalist's job is to check it out, practitioners say. "In the end, readers and the content (they contribute) are just another source," one Spanish

editor explained during our research into what online journalists at leading Western newspapers think about user contributions (Singer et al., 2011: 87). “There will always be a need for a filter, and that’s a function for the professional journalist. He has to be there to fact-check the information.” Another Spanish journalist said that “doing journalism requires following some rules, applying rigor. You have to fact-check and try to keep a more or less neutral standpoint” (Ibid.: 172).

Here, then, is a clear articulation of an ethical norm, information verification, that can be used to differentiate journalists from other online contributors. A journalist follows some rules, where non-journalists need not. A journalist checks things out, where non-journalists may not. A journalist keeps an open mind, a neutral standpoint, where non-journalists commonly do not.

Not incidentally the “there will always be a need for” phrase is one I hear repeatedly. It is an iteration of the premise that in the face of rapid, sometimes frightening change, some core roles, functions, and practices will remain the province of the journalist. In a turbulent media environment, journalists tend to see those traditional roles as an anchor, one they hope will give them job security in rough seas rather than drag them to the bottom (Singer, 2009a).

Credibility

More broadly, the ethical concern behind these challenges to the verification process is journalistic credibility. Journalists worry about the effects of inaccurate, unverified information on their own credibility as individual professionals, on the credibility of their stories and whether people will believe them, and on the credibility of the news outlet – the media brand – that publishes them.

When my colleague Ian Ashman and I visited the Guardian to explore ethical issues related to user-generated content, we asked journalists to play a little word association game: When I say “credibility” what word pops into your head? How about “responsibility,” and so

on? "Accuracy" was the number one word Guardian journalists associated with credibility. It also was number one in connection with responsibility, and it was number one in connection with overall competence. One writer, for example, said she made sure what she wrote was "bullet-proof" because she knew "someone will shoot me down if I don't, and obviously that will destroy the credibility of anything else you say" (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 14).

These journalists are afraid, not unreasonably, that if either they or their users publish information that is untrue for whatever reasons, it will undermine the credibility on which their whole enterprise rests. If people cease to find the news organization credible, they will cease to turn to it for information. That was true long before the Internet, let alone contemporary social media, appeared on the scene. But once again, it is a concern exacerbated by the presence and effects of the networked news environment, a concern felt at a local as well as a national level. "We have a responsibility for what is published on our website, and it would affect the paper's credibility if user-contributed content is not monitored closely," said an editor at a community newspaper in Britain (Singer, 2010: 137).

The concern again has a range of permutations. One involves the reputation of a news outlet that typically extends back dozens if not hundreds of years. It takes a long, long time to build trust; it does not take long at all to sacrifice it. Another is about maintaining audiences right now, in today's open media environment. When anyone can be a publisher, credibility is what the journalist has to sell. If the reasons for finding that journalist, or his employer, credible are undermined, citizens have lots of other places to turn – including other citizens.

Trust built over time is vital not just for success but ultimately also for survival. If there is an opposite of a monopoly media environment, we're living in it. While other factors help build and maintain credibility, such as independence, accountability, and fairness, truth-telling remains fundamental. One of the biggest frustrations for editors forced to slash staffs is that the cuts undermine the ability to credibly meet the news outlet's civic responsibilities.

"If our newsrooms were staffed properly, we would not rely on user-generated content to fill our pages. Instead, we would go out into the community, which we are supposed to serve, to generate our own stories and gather the news in the way in which we have been trained," said a local UK newspaper editor. "There is nothing as frustrating as knowing we are doing only half a job, relying on someone with their own agenda to provide information about an event or meeting that we should have attended ourselves, and then to see the results of our frustrated labor denounced for what it is: a rewritten press release" (Singer, 2010: 137).

User Issues

It will be obvious by now that a lot of journalism studies research currently relates to journalists' multiple concerns about user-generated content or participatory journalism – material that users contribute to news products once controlled by journalists to a much greater extent than is true today. Journalists do recognize the benefits of these contributions. They see theoretical benefits related to the opening up of the conversation on their websites, the number of views expressed, the diverse perspectives, and all that good democratic discourse stuff (Gillmor, 2006). And they see – more clearly and in many cases with more enthusiasm – the practical benefits, such as that comments, for instance, can bring a welcome boost to website traffic (Vujnovic et al., 2010). Some people like to comment, and doing so brings them back repeatedly to see check for responses. An ongoing discussion generating fresh comments also can boost search engine visibility because currency is one of the pieces of search engine algorithms.

But legal, ethical, and logistical concerns – from libel to privacy invasion to personal attacks and slurs of all sorts, and more – mean journalists in general are far from sanguine about this content from outside the newsroom. In fact, news outlets are nearly universal in attempting to "moderate" it one way or another.

Anonymity

Most media websites require users to register before they can contribute comments or other material. They do so for a variety of reasons, including that they can collect a bit of information of interest to advertisers and can go after offenders more easily if necessary. However, although the use of Facebook as a comment intermediary is becoming more widespread (Ebner, 2011), the dominant reality remains that while the media organization may know the identity of user contributors, the vast majority of those contributors use screen names rather than real ones as their public signature online. That means they are essentially anonymous, at least to other users.

This anonymity raises a variety of ethical concerns for journalists. One involves the same issues just discussed: There are not enough hours in the day to even begin to verify the information, and so its credibility is low. Moreover, unlike journalists, these users need not be accountable for what they have written. They can post any old nonsense and then vanish back into the ether. Journalists have a byline; news organizations have a masthead. Users just have their screen name … and they can change it a thousand times.

Then there is the tone of much of the material provided by users. Journalists say that largely because of this anonymity, users engage in a far more abrasive, even abusive communication style online than they would ever use in face-to-face communication or in other forms of written communication in which their real names were used. People writing anonymously "feel licensed to say things in content and style that they wouldn't own if publishing as themselves," a Guardian journalist explained (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 16).

Some of that abuse is directed against the journalists. Some is directed at other users – again, legally problematic as well as ethically troublesome. And it can be directed at sources, as well, making them reluctant to talk to reporters because they fear being skewered by users. Maybe we don't have much sympathy if the source is an elected official, but the abuse is

hardly reserved just for them. “Quality sources may soon become reluctant to appear in the paper, lest they become the subject of human ‘bear baiting,’” said a local British newspaper journalist (Singer, 2010: 134).

News outlets have experimented with various ways to make comments less anonymous in addition to the Facebook approach. My local newspaper, for instance, tested a discussion area in which people could participate only if they signed up using their real name. You can guess what happened: Virtually no one signed up, what little conversation occurred was tepid and dull, and the experiment was discontinued after a few months. Similar efforts have worked somewhat better in other countries, though, suggesting cultural variations. In Germany, at least one newspaper asks users to register under their real names, using a verifiable email address, and it locks or blocks the comments of users who do not follow the rules (Singer et al., 2011).

So people seem to like some degree of anonymity and the freedom it allows them. But that ability to speak openly creates a conversation so free-wheeling that it not uncommonly wheels right into territory that makes journalists uncomfortable. Many seem to feel that anonymity creates not just freedom to speak one’s mind but also, more problematically, a general lack of accountability for what one says. Indeed, it can be hard to imagine most seemingly normal, balanced people saying to someone’s face what they have no trouble saying online. Who are these angry, bitter people, anyway?

In our interviews, a number of journalists highlighted this issue of real-name accountability as, again, something their professional norms require but prevailing online norms do not. As a Canadian editor pointed out, reporters’ bylines are real names, “whereas bob23bc can throw out anything he wants to just inflame the crowd” (Singer et al., 2011: 111). Similarly, an editor in Finland emphasized the motivation to produce quality content as a benefit of explicit identification with that content: “One wants to focus on doing as well as

possible the thing where one's byline stands. Our wages and self-respect are based on what is below our own name in the paper" (Ibid.: 48).

Another common sentiment was that while comments are great in theory, the reality is too often quite different. They can enrich a story "if they come from people with substantive opinions, but they are not the most abundant. You find the extremists and those who use the anonymity that the 'net allows, and they sadly outnumber the former," a Spanish editor said (Ibid.: 104). In fact, both local and national journalists say that the majority, by far, of a website's users do not want to comment and do not especially want to read others' comments, either. Moreover, the ones who do want to comment are too often the ones you really wish wouldn't, and they tend to drive off people who might like to add their view but do not want to wade into a food fight. Journalists see this as a big problem, one that community management tools only partially address.

That said, some journalists also see a value to anonymity. "There will always be people who wish to remain anonymous since they want to report something they do not wish others to know they have reported," an Israeli editor pointed out (Ibid.). This is much the same argument that journalists make in wanting to protect source confidentiality, essentially the idea of protecting the would-be whistle-blower with important information to divulge. That information may be dangerous or damaging, but it also may be worthwhile for the general public to know, and only if sources can be anonymous are they willing to provide it.

In some cases, then, anonymity can facilitate the freedom to speak without fear of repercussions. In most cases, though, at least as journalists describe their experience, anonymity seems to work against the value of online discourse rather than in support of it.

Bias

Similar to the concern about online anonymity is concern about biased sourcing in general. Users may be biased in their contributions in ways journalists believe they themselves are not, and that bias can be hard to detect.

For example, people who work with citizen journalist sites have noted that contributors generally care a great deal about the local issues that they write about (Schaffer, 2010). From outside the newsroom, that may look like a considerable strength; people who care about a topic also tend to be concerned with getting the facts correct, even though they may have clear positions on the meaning of those facts. But to journalists, trained and socialized to strive for impartiality or at least open-mindedness in telling a story, user investment in a topic raises ethical concerns.

Such people may have an ax to grind, personal or – worse, in journalists' view – political. For example, journalists at a national newspaper in Scotland steadfastly ignored a passionate and wide-ranging conversation about the 2007 Scottish parliamentary elections that took place through the paper's comment function because they felt it was dominated by people they characterized as rabid nationalists (Singer, 2009b). A Belgian editor expressed a similar concern in our multinational study. "To what extent are we responsible for giving a megaphone to the public's voice and the opinion of John, Pete or Paul if we don't know who John, Pete or Paul is?" he asked. "That's important, because it might be that these guys are, for instance, politicians who want to use our forum for their own political interests" (Singer et al., 2011: 129).

It's also hard to identify people with financial or commercial interests in making their views heard from other people who are simply putting forward an idea or expressing an opinion, a concern related to the desired separation of advertising and editorial content. For instance, websites of U.S. newspapers in the Gannett chain featured hyperlocal parenting

blogs called "MomsLikeMe" for a number of years, until they were shut down in late 2011 (Kaplan, 2011). Although Gannett cited new interactive priorities in announcing the closure, the "mommy blogs" had long raised concerns about the difficulty of determining whether contributors were really who they claimed to be (Hopkins, 2008). How can either readers or journalists distinguish between a young mother who is honestly enthusiastic about a new brand of baby formula and blogging about it on the Indianapolis Star website, say, and someone from a company that bottles the same formula who also is enthusiastically blogging about its virtues?

There are also plenty of orchestrated campaigns online in which an interest group instructs its members to post comments. These often are easily identifiable, as few people bother changing the suggested wording. But the coordination effort sometimes can be harder to see, and what seems like a groundswell of opinion might really be essentially a single view, replicated.

All these issues relate to furthering an agenda, and journalists are uncomfortable with users hijacking their website space to do it. In addition, of course, there are the wing nuts who seem to populate every website and are, sadly, often its most loyal and dedicated contributors. No one in their lives has ever listened to them before – and no one is listening now. But online, who cares? They can post and post and post, and if in fact the only discernible effect is driving people away from the site, they personally suffer no harm. But the news outlet does. "A newspaper publisher is responsible for everything that it publishes, including the postings that come from the various whackjobs in society," a Canadian editor told us (Singer et al., 2011: 131). "And there are more than a few."

In a way, then, this is a concern not just about bias but also about news judgment or decisions about what goes into the media product and how, according to journalistic norms, it should be treated. In a news environment where journalists control the content, they

determine how to treat the statements of a politician or of someone pushing a particular interest. Online, journalists lose that ability to exercise control, challenging their normative principles and practices and causing the angst reflected here. As for the "whackjobs," they would not have a voice at all in the space journalists control; online, they can post their ravings like anyone else. And whilst journalists can't actually prevent it, ameliorate it, or even balance it with what they consider a more rational view, they still ultimately feel responsible for what is published on "their" sites.

Incivility

And what is published includes some really startling stuff. Of course, there is great stuff, too, as journalists also emphasize. And there is plenty of stuff that's quite mundane but that people enjoy providing, sharing, or reading, which is fine for everyone involved. In fact, users are placing increasing value in the ability to do something with information – not just read it, but re-disseminate it, add to it, or comment on it. News consumption is becoming increasingly social and participatory, and people want and expect media organizations as well as individual journalists to facilitate those opportunities (Pew Research, 2010).

But civility is a major concern amongst journalists, who are frustrated with the effort they feel is needed to mitigate it. "Debate is a core role," a local journalist explained. "Hosting mindless abuse shouldn't be" (Singer, 2010: 134). As mentioned earlier, just about everyone moderates user contributions, despite the fact that resources to do it are hard to find. Whether in-house or outsourced, moderation takes time, money, and human effort. Some journalists see the value of what users provide as "disproportionate to the excessive amount of management time [spent] trying to ensure it is accurate, balanced, honest, fair and – most importantly – legally safe to publish" (Ibid.).

Most news outlets engage in "post-moderation," meaning they don't read user contributions before they are published. They may or may not read them after they are

published, either. Instead, they are relying on users to flag potentially problematic comments, then dealing just with those.

We're also seeing more and more efforts to encourage users to foreground the good stuff and not just point out the bad, through recommendation systems, ratings tools, and other technologies that enable users to be more active managers of the online community and to essentially share the ethical decision-making for that community. This interesting development provides further evidence of loosening journalistic control, driven partly by necessity but also by policy decisions and expanding technological capabilities.

Many news website also have separate spaces in which a more hands-off approach dominates. Typically, they are holdovers from pre-Web 2.0 versions of interactivity, such as discussion forums or user bulletin boards. Journalists are generally absent from those spaces altogether. People can say just about anything in these self-regulating communities. An interesting exercise for students might be to compare the nature of the discourse in post-moderated comment threads, un-moderated forums, and pre-moderated chats. What are the differences? Which spaces are better for what purpose? What ethical issues does each raise? For whom?

Another option, most commonly found on journalists' own blogs, is to wade into the conversation and participate – raising a whole other set of ethical issues related to how you speak in these spaces, what you say and what you don't say. With the rise of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, innumerable newsrooms are struggling to craft a useful social media policy that meets the needs of the organization, its individual employees, and the audience (Fidelibus, 2012).

In the meantime, the lack of civility, particularly in user comment threads, continues to challenge journalists. "You get really, really depreciative comments," a Guardian writer said. "Whatever kind of maxims you repeat to yourself about how anything good always has

haters, it subconsciously works away." Female journalists seem particularly vulnerable to abusive remarks. "If I wanted to be called a cunt all day, I'd become a traffic warden and do it in the open air," a Guardian editor said a writer told him. (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 17). Certain topics seem to bring out the worst in people. "If they're a woman writing about the Middle East, God help them," another Guardian editor said. "It gets sexist and nasty and vicious and threatening before the moderators can step in" (Singer et al., 2011: 129). In general, "discussion invariably leads to abusive retorts, personal attacks on other users or journalists, 'flame wars' and poor quality comments, which can show our products in an extremely negative and unprofessional light" a local British journalist explained (Singer, 2010: 137).

Practitioner issue

In addition to concerns about what users do in shared online spaces, journalists face considerable uncertainty about what they themselves should do and how they should conduct themselves. What is appropriate ethical behavior for people trained to maintain a professional distance from sources and audiences but now having to actively manage their public image?

Transparency

For instance, journalists warned all their working lives to keep their personal view and voice out of their writing are now being urged to showcase both, particularly in their blogs, which have become pervasive on media websites large, small, and in between. In tone, the best blogs by journalists are conversational, candid, even cheeky. They talk about "I" and "you," not that other, more distant "third person" who fills the paragraphs of most newspaper stories (Chen, 2009). Some "J-blogs" are primarily repositories for news snippets and tips, but others offer a reflection on the world and a self-reflection on the process of turning parts of that world into a news product.

Some journalists say they feel liberated, but other reporters and editors are ethically uncomfortable. The issue comes down to different understandings of what constitutes journalistic credibility and trustworthiness – yes, again – and the best way to establish those things. For some, it rests on open communication with the public, for which a blog offers a splendid new vehicle. For others, credibility stems precisely from preservation of a neutral stance, which can be jeopardized by blogs posts.

Another aspect of transparency is showing people how the sausage is made, describing the news-making decisions and processes and, more important, explaining the rationales behind them. This is a controversial notion for journalists. Some bloggers push for disclosing all sorts of information about oneself as an individual, but many journalists choke on that idea, fearing that those searching for bias behind every byline will use such disclosures as ammunition, whilst the majority of people won't really care. Rather than telling audiences all about journalists as individuals, they are instead taking advantage of the space and the interactive format to explain why they do what they do. Why did they make this decision in this situation? Why did they include this piece of information but leave that other piece out – maybe they couldn't verify it, maybe they had doubts about the source. Some also are using the space to talk about how they gathered information, satisfying a widespread public interest in the process of journalism without inserting it into the story.

More broadly, how journalists should behave in social networking spaces has been a controversial subject. They are public spaces, but as journalists, who are you in those spaces? Are you ever not a journalist? If you are always a journalist, what does a journalist do in a space that is very different, and has a very different social ethic, from a newspaper or even the more personal medium of television? To what extent do you become a person here and not just a journalist? Is there a line dividing too much personal information from too little – and if so, how do you identify it, where do you draw it?

Various Guardian editors outlined the opportunities and the challenges. "The barriers are broken down," said one. "Users do expect more journalists to step out from behind articles, defend, and discuss them." But doing so can mean having to grow a thicker skin than many journalists say they have. Some simply "refuse to engage with people if they think the criticism are unfair or just kind of nasty. It's very off-putting, especially if you're used to just having your work out there in the newspaper being unquestioned," another editor said; a third explained that overworked journalists wonder "why would I want to respond to BigDick1197?" And responding to constant questions about information or decisions that journalists consider self-evident can become a time-consuming distraction. "It's good that people can raise things. The Internet gives them more standing to do that. The difficulty is it can then involve the media in long and tedious work to justify themselves," a fourth editor said. Users "often question very basic assumptions" (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 14-16).

Autonomy

Finally, there's the issue of autonomy, one near and dear to news practitioners. Some aspects of the ethical precept of independence are closely related to transparency: Does greater disclosure about decision-making jeopardize your objective, neutral stance as a journalist? But another aspect of autonomy is a little different. It has to do with how much influence you afford your users over not what they say – but over what you say.

Hit logs or other traffic data reports are now ubiquitous in most newsrooms. Every journalist knows exactly how many people read his or her story, exactly how much time they spent on the site, exactly how many comments they added, and exactly how many times a story was recommended, retweeted, shared on Facebook, and on and on. What should be done with that information in deciding what to write and how to write it?

Some journalists say such unprecedented and valuable information about user interests should guide their news judgments. Most, however, say doing so would be nothing

less than "traffic whoring" (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 15). This perceived challenge to their own claim to authority in exercising news judgment is fundamental to journalists' wariness about user-generated content, a misgiving manifested in the concerns about civility and the other issues described above.

An understanding of what constitutes journalistic public service is at the core of this concern. Serving the public by providing information that citizens of a democracy need to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) is supposed to be what journalism is all about. The question is who gets to determine the nature of that information. In a traditional media environment, the answer is "the journalist." Other people and factors at a variety of levels certainly influence that decision (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), but at the end of the day – literally! – what goes in the paper or on the air is the journalist's call.

That call is now contested in all sorts of ways. In our multi-national study of journalists' reactions to user contributions to the news-production process (Domingo et al., 2008), we identified five points of potential user access. For instance, can users gather information, can they disseminate it, can they interpret it after publication? We found that as of the late 2000s, users were gaining capabilities at many access points – except one, the point of deciding what's news in the first place. Journalists are very, very reluctant to cede that ground. Are they arrogant? Are they paranoid? Are they … right?

In interviews, a few journalists said gaining and maintaining user interest is the whole point, and knowing what generates that interest is a good thing. If something important is being ignored, we need to find a way to make it more interesting; if it's not important, why bother? "I have an enormous amount of independence. I can write about anything," a Guardian writer said. "But there's got to be a reason for it and a demand for it and an audience for it. Online, you do have this kind of instant knowledge of whether something you've written is of interest" (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 15). Moreover, the ability to spark

debate "gives us the chance to react to what people are thinking, in turn giving us the ability to write about what people want to know rather than what we think they want to know," as a local journalist explained. Another said user contributions "will generate story leads for newsrooms marooned on business parks for decades that have grown increasingly estranged from their communities" (Singer, 2010: 136).

Many others resist the perceived encroachment onto their occupational turf (Lowrey, 2006). "There is a danger here, we need to be aware of it, we need to fight it – we cannot fight it entirely, but we need to minimize it – not to be overly populist or pulp," an Israeli editor told us. "It is wrong for [users] to have impact at the expense of my judgment as a journalist," he added. "Let us consider the users, listen to them, consult them – but not at the expense of your ethics and your work principles" (Singer et al., 2011: 127).

Yet most journalists do see the interactive media space as offering an opportunity to reconnect. They recognize that many see them – not necessarily incorrectly – as out of touch from what people are talking about, interested in, and worrying over. Too much autonomy can lead to estrangement and even irrelevance, and these social spaces are ideal ways to forge or renew connections. Doing so is rarely easy, but journalists are finding it increasingly necessary.

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